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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000212

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS IR I2
SUBJECT: SCIRI LEADERS DEEPLY CONCERNED OVER AL-KUT
OPERATION

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: The Ambassador met with SCIRI leaders Abdulaziz al-Hakim, Vice President Adil Abdel Mehdi, and Mohsin al-Hakim on January 17 to discuss the January 16 operation in which two Badr members were detained in al-Kut on suspicions of involvement in facilitation of explosively formed projectile (EFP) networks. Al-Hakim and Abdel Mehdi strongly questioned the operation. Al-Hakim argued that both individuals were good people and asked for evidence. He described the operation as humiliating and asked why it was necessary that the operation take place at the provincial council building when at least one of the individuals regularly met with U.S. officials. Abdel Mehdi said that the raid would damage relations between the U.S. and al-Kut officials and had violated the SCIRI/Badr - U.S. relationship. The Ambassador reiterated that the charges were extremely serious and backed up by multiple sources over a period of time. He suggested that some Badr elements might be directly controlled by Iran without the knowledge of SCIRI/Badr leadership. End summary.

Targeting EFP Facilitators

¶2. (S) The Ambassador began by describing the January 16 operation in al-Kut. He noted that it was a joint Iraqi army and MNF-I operation whose target was two individuals, both members of the Wasit provincial council (PC). The Ambassador told al-Hakim that MNF-I had good information based on multiple sources that these individuals, Qassim al-Araji and Abu Taib, were involved in smuggling and distribution of explosively formed projectiles. He noted that they were also suspected in involvement in an assassination cell, had organized training in Iran, and were involved in smuggling weapons other than EFPs. The U.S. had taken a decision to go after EFP networks that target coalition forces, the Ambassador said, reiterating that al-Araji and Abu Taib were suspected in involvement based on multiple sources of information.

A Hard, Skeptical Response

¶3. (S) Al-Hakim replied by strongly criticizing the arrests and the manner in which they were carried out. He said that the governor of Wasit Province and the chairman of the PC had visited him earlier in the day. He objected to the "humiliating" way it was carried out, highlighting that al-Araji had been dragged out of the PC building by the collar. Hakim noted that al-Araji, as the PC's security coordinator, had close relations with the local U.S. officials. He continued that al-Araji is an upstanding citizen; well liked as a moderate by Sunnis in the town of

Suwaiyah; and appreciated for his role in alleviating the winter's fuel crisis by coordinating the smooth movement of fuel trucks from Iran. Al-Hakim described Abu Taib as a "simple, poor man, who has nothing to do with security issues." He called the arrests "random" and requested evidence. The manner of the arrests, he said, sent a message that SCIRI and Badr "could not be trusted." "By doing it this way, you will lose your friends." He asked that if there is evidence against any SCIRI/Badr member, that that evidence be brought to him so that "we can help you bring them in for arrest and brand them as traitors and explain publicly what they've done."

¶4. (S) Abdel Mehdi called the operation "very dangerous and serious." He asked if "we are going back to the days of Saddam Hussein, where people are picked up at night" with little evidence. He added that even if the allegations proved correct, the Coalition should not have conducted the operation at an "immune" site like the PC building. "Are we friends or enemies," Abdel Mehdi asked, noting that the operation "has caused incredible damage between you and the people of al-Kut and has violated your relationship with an ally, SCIRI and Badr." He voiced a concern that the detained individuals might be forced to sign a confession to something they did not do in order to justify the operation. He argued that there must be "procedures" between the U.S. and Iraq to handle these issues in the future. Mohsin al-Hakim noted that the Prime Minister, who was with Abdulaziz al-Hakim when word came of the raid, had not known of it and was upset. He asked how Iraq could be a country governed by rule of law when such an operation could take place on PC members without an arrest warrant.

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Planting the Seeds of Cooperation

¶5. (S) The Ambassador told the SCIRI leaders that he took their point on board about the manner in which the operation took place and would raise it with MNF-I. He reiterated, however, that al-Araji and Abu Taib were picked up based on serious charges developed from credible information over a period of time. He suggested that there might be a pattern within Badr, and perhaps even SCIRI, whereby there were elements directly controlled by Iran that the SCIRI/Badr leadership was not aware of. He noted that Badr likely had a good intelligence network and suggested that al-Hakim tap that network to develop information on people involved in EFP networks in order to help MNF-I track them down.

KHALILZAD